

LONDON IS THEATRE CAPITAL OF WORLD

Barnum, Circus Proprietor, dies

1891: Phineas Taylor Barnum, the American showman, has died at the age of 81. He began by exhibiting the 160 year old former slave who had been nurse to George Washington, and then opened a New York show with such curiosities as a Fiji mermaid and the dwarf, Tom Thumb. He managed the American tour of Swedish singer, Jenny Lind, and then opened a three-ring touring circus called "the greatest show on earth". In 1881 he joined with a rival and formed the famous Barnum and Bailey Circus.

Her Majesty's closes and is pulled down

1891: The third theatre to be built on this site in the Haymarket is no more. After just 14 years it has been a complete failure. The building has been demolished.

Trafalgar Square Theatre opens

1892: Back to back with the three year old Garrick Theatre, the new theatre in St Martin's Lane has been named the Trafalgar Square Theatre and opened on September 10th. Even though it is equipped with the latest electric lighting and has gas lighting as an emergency back-up, the theatre, rather curiously, has real coal-burning fire-places in the auditorium to provide the heating. The opening play was "The Wedding Eve"

Opera House has one lavatory for 500 people

1892: Not one of the dressing rooms at the Opera House, Covent Garden is ventilated to the open air and, incredibly, there is only one lavatory backstage for the use of the entire company of Principals, supers and dancers. One lavatory between 400 to 500 people has been condemned by the Sanitation Board.

"Old Mo closes for re-building

1892: The Oxford Music Hall has been closed for a major rebuilding programme. The "new" Oxford will be the third theatre on the Oxford Street site.

1892: As the end of the nineteenth century approaches, London has become the theatre capital of the world.

From a population of 865,000 in 1801, London has become an enormous city with a sprawl of new suburbs linked by extensive rail and road services.

At the beginning of this century London had two legally permitted theatres with a handful of other venues which would open occasionally, usually outside the law.

This year a Report to the Select Committee on Theatres has established no other city can equal the number or quality of theatres and entertainments. The Report says there are 50 licensed theatres in the capital, together with 39 Variety Halls licensed for music and dancing, and 461 Music Halls, concert halls and other places of amusement. If all these places were filled to capacity they would hold half a million people each night.

There has also been an enormous boom in theatre building throughout the country. 108 new provincial theatres have opened in the past decade alone.

The Report estimates there are nearly 400 theatre buildings throughout the country, suggesting 200 "legitimate" theatres, 160 Variety Halls, and approximately 40 seasonal theatres, mainly in seaside towns.

D'Oyly Carte builds a new opera house

1891: Richard D'Oyly Carte has opened his home for English Opera - a magnificent new theatre on an island site at Cambridge Circus. It is called the Royal English Opera House. The enormous, triple-decker theatre has been designed by Colcutt and Holloway and has all the latest facilities and equipment necessary for the production of the highest standard of opera.

It has been built from the profits made by Mr D'Oyly Carte at his Savoy Theatre in the Strand. Since all these profits have accrued from productions of the operettas of W.S. Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan, it is only fitting that the opening production should be of an opera by Sullivan himself, "Ivanhoe".

In spite of his enormous popularity as a composer of comic operas, Sullivan is also known for his more serious work, including the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers", "The Lost Chord" and the cantata "The Golden Legend". He was knighted in 1883. To the surprise of many, no similar honour was offered to W.S. Gilbert. It is said that Gilbert is so blunt and rude that Queen Victoria refuses to honour him.

Sullivan's "Ivanhoe" ran for six months, but because of the enormous costs involved in running the show, it failed to make a profit. D'Oyly Carte followed it with a production of Messenger's "La Basoche". This, too, is failing to pay for itself.

Failed Opera House becomes Music Hall

1892: Just two years after its much trumpeted launch, the Royal English Opera House has failed, forcing Richard D'Oyly Carte to sell the property to Augustus Harris of the Drury Lane Theatre. The theatre is to be re-named the Palace Theatre and will re-open as a Variety Theatre.



LOTTIE'S DOUBLE "BOOM DE AY"

1891: Lottie Collins, appearing in "Dick Whittington" at the Grand, Islington, introduced a song called "Ta Ra Ra Boom De Ay". The song starts quietly and builds to a whirling, high-kicking huge finale. It has become an enormous success and Lottie Collins herself has become one of the music hall's top attractions. George Edwards, of the Gaiety, is so taken with the song that he has engaged Miss Collins to perform it in the Gaiety's current show. She rushes backwards and forwards each night from Islington to the Strand to perform her nightly "double"